Review Article

Ethics for Medical Educators: An Overview and Fallacies

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ABSTRACT

Ethics is the rule of right conduct or practice in a profession. The basic principles of ethics are beneficence, justice and autonomy or individual freedom. There is very minor demarcation between ethics and the law. The ethics is promulgated by the professional bodies. All are expected to guide the medical professional in their practice. Medical educators have dual ethical obligations: firstly, to the society at large which expects us to produce competent health professionals, and secondly, to the students under our care. The students observe and copy what their teacher does and his/her role modelling can be a gateway to a student's character building. Due to rapid increase in the number of medical colleges, privatization, and capitalism, ethical issue has become much more relevant and needs to discuss in detail. The present paper discusses the ethics for medical educators in detail with, basic principles, common breaches of ethics and fallacies due to wrong application of ethical principles, and the approach to ethics and methods by which we can prevent and avoid breach of ethics.

Key words: *Ethics for educator, ethics, medical education*

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the rule of right conduct or practice in a profession.[1] There is a very minor demarcation line between the ethics and the law. The law is governed by the court and can be challenged in the courts, but ethics come and are governed by inner soul and consciences of the human beings.

Medical profession is considered as a noble profession because people compare doctor with God, so the doctors have the moral duty to follow the ethics.

The national code of ethics promulgated by Medical Council of India, World Medical Association and International Code of Ethics all are expected to guide the Medical Professionals in their practice.[2] In the last 20 years, Medical and Dental colleges in India have sprouted at a very fast rate though we have limited faculty. This has created a marked shortage of medical teachers and medical institutions need to develop their own human resources.[3] Faculty development program will meet shortage of medical teachers and groomed faculty for leadership roles to provide solutions for achieving the standards of health for population. The objective of the present paper is to discuss the basic principles of ethics and their relevance in medical education. This paper also discusses the current status and their common fallacies.

The code of ethics or conducts promulgated by most medical councils or professional bodies is aimed at protecting the interest of profession by promoting the interest of the patients or people it serves. The oldest

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code is 2000 year old and known as Hippocratic oath. The code of *Hammurabi* and *Charak Samhita* are other ancient texts which contain guidelines for medical practice.[2]

The basic tenet of all these text has been to exhort doctors or medical professionals to carry out activities which "benefit" or at least "do not harm" the patients. In addition, these days it also deals relationship among the medical professionals and the rules of setting up practices etc.[2]

Basic principles of ethics

There are three fundamental principles of "universal ethics".[1]
1. a. Beneficence (do good)
    b. Non maleficence (do not harm)
2. Justice and equality (versus bias)
3. Autonomy or individual freedom (versus paternalism)

House (1990) has discussed three principle of ethics[4]
1. Mutual respect
2. No coercion and non manipulation and
3. Support of democratic values

Jagsi R[5] in 2004 also explained all ethical issues for health educators on these three basic principles
1. Respect for individual
2. Beneficences and
3. Distributive justice

All professionals are expected to follow these universal principles to the best of their ability. The ethics in medical education is a very vast topic for discussion. Medical educators have dual obligation of ethics over students, one in the context of patient and doctor and another in the context of teacher and student. In the present article, we mainly discuss the role of ethics between teachers and students context.

What is the point of telling people the noble truth when they seem not to care and are busy with mundane things? Faced with this question from the Mara; the Evil, Buddha replied, "There will be some who will understand". The spirit of these powerful words gives us endless hope. When a clinician starts managing a patient, there is a hope that the patient will recover. Hope is something that keeps us moving when things are not all right. The same is true for ethics also, no matter what the nature of ethics plasticized in an institution; the possibility always exists that there are people who are concerned about ethical lapses and who would like to see a change in less than the ideal ethical climate.[6]

At present, everybody is giving emphasis on the ethics for doctor with respect to professionalism and patient. The topic for medical teacher in respect to students is ignored and thus lags far behind.

WHO, SEARO (South East Asia Regional Office) has reviewed the situation of teaching of ethics in six countries of the region (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri- Lanka). The study concluded that the teaching of ethics in these countries is in a state of infancy, mostly based in the department of Forensic Medicine which mainly emphasizes negligence and malpractice.[7] In response, WHO (SEARO) has developed a curriculum on medical ethics for undergraduate for South East Asian medical schools.

The term ethical conduct brings forward a debate about the distinctions between the code of conduct and their purposes and ethical principles and their place in the teaching profession. Some would argue that the code of conduct mandates specific behaviors in particular situations but do not promote individual adherence to ethical principles. Code of conduct may assist but not give clear definition to teacher's decision making. In other words, the organization or system can mandate, what not to do in particular situation but it is impossible to list all possible situations that may arise. This becomes the ground of ethical decision making. The delivery of training related to code of conduct may be possible. Training individuals to adhere to particular ethical principles when making decision may not be possible. Ethical decision making can be described as the intersection of the three key components [Figure 1].[8]

Approaches of ethics

There is a range of different approaches to the resolution of ethical issues. One approach might to be ascertaining "facts" that might have a bearing on the
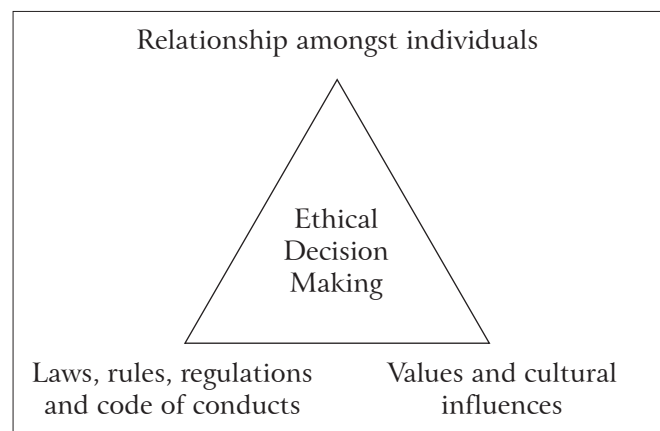

Figure 1: Triad for Ethical decision making

decision. However, facts are often contested and facts by themselves may describe what is, but not necessarily what ought to be. The various approaches to ethical decision making have been suggested. They are:[8]

Justice approach
Focuses on how fairly or unfairly actions distribute benefits to members of a group.

Right approach
In decision making, assume that each person has a fundamental right to be respected and treated as a free and rational person.

Virtue approach
In decision making, this approach focuses on characteristics, attitude and disposition – integrity, honesty, and trust worthiness that enable people to develop their human potential.

Utilitarian approach
In decision making advanced by philosophers such as Bentham and Mill, i.e. regards ethical action as those producing the greatest difference of benefits over harms.

Common good approach
In decision making, regard ethical behavior as that which advances the good of the whole community, individuals or groups are not to be exploited at the expense of others.

Social relation approach
In decision making, regards the values of different cultures and group as being grounded in a particular social context or reality. It therefore becomes difficult for a person from one culture or group to pass judgment on the values of other.

Common breeches of ethics

However, certain acts are always considered as unethical though this is not a complete list of all unethical behaviors.[9]

- Having inappropriate relationships with students (sexual, business partnerships, drinking etc.)
- Violation of clearly stated college rules and educational procedures
- Failing to perform duties (no teaching, chaos, wrong attitude toward the teaching profession etc.)
- Imposing personal views on students unrelated to the subject of a lesson or promoting view that do not represent the main stream(extreme political or religious views, views on controversial social issues, interest of a particular social group etc.)
- Improper grading, partiality, and lack of fairness (based on who is liked, who is not, race, past performance, socioeconomic background etc.)
- Exposing student to embarrassment or disparagement (emotional or psychological harassment)
- Invading student's privacy
- Engaging students in unethical behavior
- Accepting gifts and favors, quid pro quo ("for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous")
- Deceiving students and their parents.

Common ethical fallacies

This occurs because of the wrong application of ethical principles.

There is nothing universal true but "facts" are considered as the truth always in relation to something else. The same is true for ethical principles; they should be applied in context of the reality. Following are the common fallacies of the ethical principles.

Clientism
Assuming and doing whatever students want is ethically right. It is the ethical duty of teachers to differentiate between the "real need" and "felt need" and to show the right way to students. This is just not to think that we are respecting student's individuality.[1]

Contractulism
Sticking to the written contract and not to look beyond it, saying "It is none of my business". If a student is found to be engaged in unethical or unlawful activities, it is teachers ethically bound duty to do something. "It is not in my contact" approach is like that of an Ostrich with it head in sand.[1]

Positivism
Holding a belief that medical facts are totally separated from the values "facts are value free" and search for facts without consideration of ethical issue i.e. doing an expensive investigation knowing that patient is not able to cope financially just for documentation purpose.[1]

Traditionalist
They are influenced by their tradition and think that generation is changing and it is impossible to change the attitude of the newer generation.[10]

To teach ethics, we need teachers who value and care for ethics in individual and collective life, practice ethics in their academic and professional world, and in life, act as role model or mentors for the learner.

When discussing teacher's ethics, one must consider it on two separate planes. Firstly, the legal one, or so to say,

administrative, where all aspects of teachers behavior; teaching procedure and assessment are framed into a set of regulations drawn up by the professional, universities and institutional bodies. Secondly at personal level, which includes a teacher's own attitude and conduct that is not otherwise prescribed/described by law or whose breach might never be detected in grievances process. The teacher's code of ethics comprises his/her duties, responsibilities, attitude honesty and most of all fairness.[9]

The medical teachers have various roles as a teacher, a manager, an administrator, a researcher and a doctor and all roles are governed and require a code of ethics. The principles of ethics in all roles are always same.

How to prepare ethically sound teachers?

We can prepare ethically sound teachers in the medical field by adopting the following strategies and policies.

1. A committee of administrators, teachers and students should draft an unambiguous policy regarding academic honesty and that should be widely published through inclusion in the college prospectus and other publications, posting on the institution web sites and communicating it to the newly admitted students and their parents.[6]
2. The document should also provide a list of punishment that would be imposed if there is a deviation from ethical behavior.[6]
3. Strict invigilation standards should be implemented in all examinations. Studies have shown that those who cheat in medical schools are known to cheat later, in patient care too.[11,12]
4. Teachers should be rewarded for their ethically sound character because students observe and copy what their teacher does and his/her role modelling can be a gateway to a student's character building.[13]
5. Management, authority can give special attention to their teachers in promotion, increments and rewards to ethically sound teachers.
6. A regular feedback from the students should be taken by the authorities on their teacher's behaviour and way of teaching.
7. A fair and transparent policy should be developed by the management with the help of academicians regarding student's assessments.[6]
8. Management/administrators should also behave ethically to their faculties. A good ethical practice definitely uplifts the name and fame of the institution.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that before doing an act, medical teachers should analyze their act on basic principles of ethics by themselves and should take their own soul decision based on conscience. It is the responsibility of both the individual and the administration to create best environment and culture habits so that good ethical practice can be carried out successfully.

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